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AUTHOR Duncan, P. Kay
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ABSTRACT

The researcher recounts her own experiences as an educational administrator in a central office who examined that position in a research study of the power relations and effectiveness of women in administrative authority. The researcher's reactions to being the object of study, and being perceived in a way that differed from her self-perceptions, gave rise to considerations of the role of inquiry and of the effects of research on the subjects of that research. Issues of emancipatory research and its impact are explored. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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P. Kay Duncan

P. Kay Duncan, Ed.D.
Associate Professor
Division of School Leadership/Middle and Secondary Teacher Education
Box 4037, 1200 Commercial
Emporia State University
Emporia, KS 66801-5087
316.341.5778
FAX: 316.341.5768
Duncanpk@esumail.emporia.edu

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Falling from Favor: "Is It Real Or Is It Memorex?"

(Musings About Invasive Inquiry)

Let us explore together. Let us explore the nature of self-discovery. Let us explore what might happen when someone discovers (because of data presented by a researcher) that her positive concept of herself is not mirrored by others; that all she had thought herself to be is perhaps not agreed to by others; that the success she thought she had experienced was not perceived as success by others. What happens to this person? What emotions rise to the surface? What self-reflections and self-doubts commence? Where does it all end?

Then let us ask ourselves what our role as researchers should be in this journey toward the self-discovery of our respondents. Let us examine whether our desire to "emancipate" our respondents is harmful or helpful. Let us question whether or not we are acting as oppressors as we practice "reciprocity". Let us explore together.

The Impact of Others' Perceptions about Us

A few years ago I read a narrative of a first-year teacher's reaction to her supervisor's evaluatory comment, "She has great potential. . . ." The teacher, in a written self-reflection, angrily took issue with this choice of words because she felt she was already performing successfully, not that she simply had the potential to do so. She felt the remark was condescending. The principal, as her supervisor, had considered his statement to be a positive and encouraging remark which was meant to compliment her. One of my reactions to this situation was to wonder how two persons' reactions to the language and the "reality" of the situation could be so completely different.

Are most of us so wrapped up in our own perceptions of self, that others' perceptions threaten that self? Are others' perceptions so important to us? As a principal, sensing that the answer to the first two questions was "Yes", I became more careful in my evaluatory comments during performance appraisal of staff members.

As a school administrator, I was accustomed to dealing with perceptions in basically two ways: my perceptions of others and their perceptions of me. In performance appraisals, for example, I was evaluated by my supervisors based on their perceptions and I evaluated school building staff based on my perceptions. However, when engaged in clinical supervision with staff members, I was trained to practice active, attentive listening, to ask open-ended questions, to rephrase, to remain neutral - to help the staff member come to her or his own "truth" - her or his own "reality". Was this a supportive and helpful process? I thought it was - until I had a feedback conference with one of my best young teachers and she broke into tears. Why? Because to even indirectly imply that she was anything but a great teacher was painful to her. She was doing her best. I was her boss, and in actuality, at the moment, her oppressor.

Both of these women considered themselves to be doing a good job of teaching. Both of them were dismayed to find that someone else's perceptions of them, no matter how carefully couched and expressed, were different from their own.

As an administrator, I became more skilled at helping teachers to self-examine their teaching during clinical supervision. There were no more tears from good teachers.

However, as a researcher, I have had to learn the same lesson all over again. As a qualitative researcher, I practice "reciprocity. . . give and take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power" (Lather, 1991, p. 57). This negotiation of meaning involves the "recycling of description, emerging analysis and conclusions" (Lather, 1991, p. 61) with the respondent. Because of an extremely personal and traumatic experience as a researcher/respondent myself, I have become quite aware of the possible repercussions of my language and my perceptions as a researcher employing reciprocity with respondents.

I recount my story in the hopes that it will point out to other researchers the possibly oppressive nature of the researcher's position. I also wish to illustrate the power (whether emancipatory or not remains for the reader to judge) of reciprocity. My story is not pretty - at least not to me. In fact, in some ways I am still hesitant to tell it, but I believe it should be told. If qualitative researchers practicing emancipatory research engage in invasive and potentially damaging behaviors, they should at least be aware of it.

Setting the Scene

To help the reader understand why and how the events of the story affected me, it seems necessary to state that my roots are in romanticism. As a child I indulge in romantic fantasies, was convinced of my personal value, engaged life with passion, and made it my goal to learn all the languages of the world. In college, I majored in Spanish and French and read Wordsworth, Shelley, and Baudelaire (in French). In Paris, I admired the canvases of Delacroix and Gericault. In fact, pieces of the romantic are sprinkled throughout my life: I hold heroes in awe, I have an inherent belief in the good of others, I believe in a family bonded in love, I believe in a deep and personal significance of life, and I have a belief in ideals. It is this idealism which most strongly underpins my tale of invasive inquiry: I believed in the ideal that I was capable, competent, and successful in my lifetime endeavors and that everyone else perceived me in the same way.

Now, lest you think me naive in my romanticism, let me assure you that I grew up in a modernist world as did the readers of this story. The twentieth century enforced upon all of us the ideas of objective evidence and rational utility. Scientific evidence, reasoning, practical, real-world reality surrounded us. Even education has been regarded as a scientific endeavor. We have been socialized to believe that we could make relatively straightforward judgments about the "goodness of character" of others (Gergen, 1991, p. 39). We have come to believe that there is a truth about persons and that we can discover that truth. Researchers and theorists have claimed that success could be indicated by a phenomenon called "achievement motivation". The effect on me was that I made an assumption that there was a "truth" about me - I believed that I was "dynamic, energetic, doing a good job, successful". I also believed that possessing those characteristics would cause other people to respect me, to like me, to think that I was a good principal. I honestly thought after I was promoted to division director of curriculum, that I could affect the fortune of the school district's entire curriculum and influence positively the views of people in the district and in the community. I believed myself to be successful, for I was a modernist, and one thing followed another logically and reasonably.

My Tale

This will be a tale, a recounting, a baring of the soul - in the romantic fashion.

I was 50 years old. I had taught foreign languages in the public schools and had been an elementary principal and a junior high principal. At the time of the story, I had been division

director of curriculum for four years in the central office of a city school district of approximately 9000 students. I had been married for 27 years to the same man, also an educator and we had two children. I had just finished my doctorate. My dissertation had focused on my first year in central office.

A friend of mine, who was a junior high principal and had just finished her doctorate, had written a dissertation about a woman superintendent and the use of power. Cryss suggested that we come together to consider our research with the purpose of submitting a proposal to UCEA (University Council for Educational Administration) focused on what our research had taught us. I agreed. We used an audio cassette recorder to tape our conversations and she later transcribed them.

My friend tells me now that she had intended that I be the respondent in this situation, even though we were looking at both of our pieces of research. However, my memory tells me that I felt myself to be an equal participant - both of us as researchers examining both of our studies. We had held many such stimulating academic discussions in the nine years that we had known one another, and I regarded this encounter to be yet another such discussion albeit on a slightly different and more challenging plane. This was to be my first experience with a presentation proposal to a national meeting. I had no real idea what to expect.

Power

During discussions Cryss and I had held while I was writing my dissertation, she had already suggested that I was a "power-over" person. The definition of "power over" is the ability of a person to convince others to do as she wishes through any means possible (Brunner, 1993). Since I held collaboration in high esteem and worked with groups of people to make all kinds of major decisions, I considered myself more of a "power to" person - a person with "the ability to empower others to make their own decisions collaboratively and to carry them out through a collective, inclusive model" (Brunner, 1993, p. 190). As a matter of fact, it felt bad to be considered "power over" by anyone. I had never wanted to be called boss, I didn't like the idea of using power over other people, or telling people what to do.

However, as I examined the journal I had written during my first year in central office and explored the feelings I had experienced in central office, one of the themes that emerged was centered around power. Although the data concerning power in my study is too complex to fully represent here, it basically involved three constructs: 1) I experienced a loss of hierarchical power in moving from a principalship to a flattened district organization which gave me little position authority; 2) I had been removed from the powerful principals' network with which I had formerly been associated and felt the loss; 3) I was one of two women in a central office administrative position where there had never been women administrators before - as such we had a lot to prove (Duncan, 1993).

My conclusions about whether I was "power over" or "power to" are documented in my dissertation. I felt that:

> the "power to- power over" dichotomy was rather simplistic - that I was both. My reflection on the question led me to realize that by writing about "power to" and "power over" as if they were distinct entities, I had fallen into the trap of positivism. I had classified and stratified bare shadowy concepts as if they were real. As I continued examining the thoughts underlying the question, I explored the possibility that these

> concepts lay more on a continuum and that most people were somewhere along the continuum, neither completely one or the other. . . I cannot speak for other women administrator, but after a great deal of examination of the issue, my frank perception of myself is that I have some characteristics of both "power to" and "power over" . . . (Duncan, 1993, p. 133).

Success

Cryss and I met. We discussed our research. We discussed power. We discussed our own experiences with power and with men and other women. We discussed how people perceived us. We shared ever more intimate thoughts and feelings. At times we referred to ourselves as power-over. Eventually, Cryss, citing her research, stated that power-over women are regarded as non-successful. She stated that even though such women might actually be competent and capable, people did not consider them as such and would not support them. People didn't like them, and in some instances, even hated them. I took strong exception to what seemed to me to be a kind of betrayal. She was my friend. How could she say such things about me? Did she know things about me that I didn't know? Had she heard things about me that I was unaware of? I just couldn't actually believe that she thought I was unsuccessful. She knew the things I had accomplished. I argued. I presented arguments. I denied. I asserted. I tore at her conclusions. I did not accept being put in the category of "unsuccessful".

In my present memory, I was wounded and angry that night. Although mostly I have tried to forget the incident, if I choose to, I can remember some of my feelings almost as if I were still there. I remember less acutely that I continued to try to reason against Cryss' assertations, that I tried to use my mind to fight off what felt like an accusation. I refused to consider myself as non-successful. I had always been successful and I had proof of it. Certainly most of the people in the school district would also consider me to be successful. The discussion/argument wore on. I could no longer abide it and left - I felt cold and hot at the same time and I was extremely angry with Cryss. However, I remember trying very hard not to show my anger, trying to reason with her, and wanting to get out of there without exploding. In the car during the 30 minute drive home, I vented freely. When I got home I wrote notes to myself about why Cryss was wrong, and why I was so angry with her. I fully intended to discuss these ideas the next time we met but for some reason, I never took the notes out of my desk drawer.

I sense that I may never be able to totally disassociate myself from the feelings I felt that night (although I wish that I might because this would mean that I am at last able to come to grips with the nature of "reality" and the nature of "truth"). Although Cryss and I have discussed it many times since, although the completed proposal was accepted and we presented at UCEA, although three years have passed, I am not fully able to discuss the subject without some pain. Cryss sent me the transcript in preparation for an AERA presentation on invasive inquiry, and all I could feel when I read our dialogue was an awful trepidation. It brought back the anger and suffering I had felt on that night. It also brought with it fear - fear that people in our audience at AERA would believe that the "reality" was that I was unsuccessful as an administrator.

The Truth About Reality

Why, in fact, are we attached to the truth? Why the truth rather than lies? Why the truth rather than myth? Why the truth rather than illusion? And, I think that, instead of trying to find out what truth, as opposed to error, is, it might be more interesting to take up the problem posed

by Nietzsche: how is it that, in our societies, the "truth" has been given this value, thus placing us absolutely under its thrall? (Foucault, 1995, p. 45)

In our conversation/argument that night, I was so certain that Cryss was wrong, and she was so adamant that she was right, that I wanted to prove to her that she didn't know the truth, that reality was something other than she asserted. It was during the course of our conversation that I began to suggest doing my own research. My anger didn't completely dissipate, it just took another route. I planned a study designed to find out the "truth". I had by this time accepted a position as a professor at a university and had written a proposal for AERA based on my new study. This study explored the questions: How can a woman be perceived as successful in a central office administrative position? How is success defined by those with whom she works? What do her colleagues accept as successful behaviors, attitudes, and actions? (Duncan, P.K. & Rathmel, K., 1995)

The study looked at five women administrators in central office, two from one district, three from another, both school districts located in two mid-western cities. All of the women were in upper echelon administrative positions other than that of the superintendency. And, of course, one of those women was me. I had already left the district for my university job, so it was fairly easy for my fellow researcher, as a participant observer in my district, to conduct the interviews in that district, code the data so the informants would remain anonymous to me, and return the data to me for analysis. I conducted all the research in the other district.

The study was completed, the data as powerful, and that self-journey will be the subject of still another paper. Let it be said that one of the most excruciating experiences in lifetime might be conducting emancipatory/invasive inquiry with yourself. I had to cope with what I learned and that led me into the post-modern world. I started the long and terrible journey of shucking my romanticist idealism and my modernism judgments. I immersed myself in self-reflection. I faced the social construction of my reality and the category of "successful". I began to accept that there are multiple identifiable realities. In short, I have begun to doubt that there can be a single, objective account - a concept of objective truth (Gerner, 1991). I am, perhaps, on the road to recovery from my anger- and from my certainty.

The perversity of it is that, unwittingly, I have been involved in what seems to be a five-stage process well known in the literature on death and dying and the literature on cultural identity. These stages are categorized by the modernist world as denial (I denied that anyone could consider me as non-successful); anger (I lashed out in anger for some time); rationalization (I rationalized that I could find out the truth by doing my own study); depression (when I faced the data from my study, I was deeply depressed for several weeks); self-acceptance (with a post-modern outlook and a sense of well-being in my position as a professor, I have a new acceptance of myself and a new acceptance of "reality") (Hedva, 1992).

Lived experience

And so, my tale is over. You have seen the situation through my eyes and heard it through my voice. You may be wondering at this point how I can call myself a researcher and this paper a study, when the paper appears to be just a narrative. The method I have used is based on lived experience. My lived experience thus serves as the data for my study. "Data are used differently;" as Lather states, "rather than to support an analysis, they are used demonstrably, performatively" (1991, p. 150). Eisner believes that "it is more important to understand what

people experience than to focus simply on what they do" (1988, p.x.). This focus on the importance of experience in educational research is echoed in the works of Greene (1991), Connelly & Clandinin (1988), Miller (1992), Ayers (1992), and Schubert (1992).

This inquiry employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to human science research and writing. Van Manen (1990) explains that this approach:

> offers a pedagogically grounded concept of research that takes its starting point in the empirical realm of everyday lived experience. The notion underlying this approach is that interpretive phenomenological research and theorizing cannot be separated from the textual practice of writing. (p. ix)

As a work of human science, this study is not "research for the sake of research", but rather research as a way of investigating certain kinds of questions. The hermeneutical phenomenological method is well suited for the strong emotions and pervasive interest which I have in the topic of emancipatory research and its potential for being invasive. Hermeneutics and phenomenology are human science approaches which are based in philosophy. In fact, they are philosophies and reflective disciplines, and thus it is necessary that my writing reflect the epistemological or theoretical implications of doing phenomenology and hermeneutics. I have worked to combine this pedagogic human science research with practice - the study not only theorizes upon practice, it attempts to inform practice. Van Manen (1990) asserts that:

> The purpose of human science research for educators is a critical pedagogical competence: knowing how to act tactfully in pedagogic situations on the basis of a carefully edified thoughtfulness . . hermeneutic phenomenological research. . . encourages a certain attentive awareness to the details and seemingly trivial dimensions of our everyday educational lives. It makes us thoughtfully aware of the consequential in the inconsequential, the significant in the taken-for-granted. Phenomenological descriptions, if done well, are compelling and insightful. The eloquence of the texts may contrast sharply with the toil, messiness, and difficulties involved in the research/writing process. (p.8)

<u>The End</u>

There is never really an end. My students in educational administration question me after I present to them the data and the conclusions about "power over" women. What is a power over woman to do? they ask. How does a power over woman cope? I am at least able to talk about multiple realities, social constructions of reality (perceptions), and the truth. My students in analysis of research question me after I present to them the data and the conclusions about invasive inquiry. How can you practice reciprocity without being invasive? they ask. How can you sort out the truth? I am at least able to talk about multiple realities, social constructions of reality (perceptions), and the truth.

I am more at peace. I have a new concept of reality. I have a newly-shaped acceptance of myself. And, I am cautious when I practice emancipatory research!

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